

CHRISTOPHER SOWER, JUNIOR

By Frank Gehman, Pastor, North Vandergrift, Pa.

In Christopher Sower, Jr. we have the most conspicuous and influential figure amongst the German Baptist Brethren of his day. Never was son more like father than this man like the illustrious parent who went before him. The common rule that extraordinary parents have only ordinary children does not fit here. Christopher, Jr. was the worthy son of a noble father. Perhaps to some extent their striking closeness can be traced to a mutual sorrow they bore.

Born Sept. 26, 1721 in the little town of Laasphe in Wittgenstein, Germany—his father's birthplace—the child was only three years of age when the family emigrated to America. No pleasureable journey on luxurious liners was this, but a trying and even hazardous ordeal of privation and suffering on slow and uncertain sailing vessels. Arrival at Germantown in the autumn of 1724 the family spent the two following winters there, closely associated with the Brethren of that city.

In the spring of 1726 he accompanied his parents to Muhlbach valley in the Conestoga country where they took up life on a fifty acre farm. In appearance and detail this was much like their native Wittgenstein. Here it was that the little family's happiness suddenly gave way to a long sorrow. The wife and mother became ensnared in the mystical teachings of Conrad Beissel which finally led to leave home and family and enter the cloisters of Ephrata in late 1730.

Thereupon in the spring of 1731 father and son, the latter now in his tenth year, returned to Germantown and to earlier friends. From among the several good German schools in the city Junior's father placed him in that of the somewhat eccentric Christopher Dock. Notwithstanding his trait of eccentricity, Dock was intelligent, scholarly, honest and sincere, and his fine piety was a splendid pattern to set before any student.

In this school young Sower learned well, receiving a good foundation for a "broad culture and sound scholarship." Developing a true love for knowledge and partaking of the best culture the German schools of his day and locality could provide he made good progress. Beyond even this he became a proficient student of English, later having charge of the English department of his father's printing establishing.

The years from 1730 to 1744, the period during which the wife and mother was at Ephrata, were years in which father and son, sharing their great

sorrow, were especially closely united in interests. The father seems to have found some relief in unceasing creative activity, but this did not lead him to neglect his son and the two became very close in their associations.

These formative years of Junior's life were much affected by this close companionship with his illustrious and pious father. Coupled with this was the influence of his also pious Mennonite pedagogue. Further, he seems to have been a regular attendant at the services of the Brethren Church in Germantown. Upon a foundation of no mean native ability these influences were built to make a great man.

At fifteen years of age he heeded the Lord's call to surrender his life and was baptized Feb. 24, 1737. From thence onward he was zealous in the work of the church. In 1747 he was elected to the deacon's office, and in 1748 to the ministry, he and Alexander Mack, Jr. being placed in charge of the Germantown congregation. In 1753 he was elevated to the eldership. His service to the church was long and renowned and he was her best known representative in his time.

A long letter written to his mother in 1744 at Ephrata had finally broken down the hold of mysticism upon her and in November of that year she returned to her home after fourteen years of absence. Happiness henceforth reigned there to the great joy of the son who had been able in the great mercy of God to reconcile his mother's thinking.

April 1, 1751 he was united in marriage to Catherine Sharpnack. Whatever doubts of marriage may have entered the young man's mind as a result of his parents' unhappy experience, happiness and contentment seem to have been the lot of his own home life.

Upon the death of his father in 1758 he assumed the control and ownership of the parental possessions. The Sower press, already the largest and most influential German press in America, he carried forward to greater heights of success and usefulness, enlarging the plant and the scope of its work. In this instance the death of a great man was not so badly felt because an equally great son was well prepared and well able to take the place left vacant and to continue the work so nobly begun.

A power in the church, of unequalled influence amongst the German colonists and a defender of their rights, the greatest book manufacturer of his

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day in the colonies, a leader in education, a philanthropist in his own right, faithful and loyal to the tenets of the Dunker faith, a conspicuous figure in the councils of his church, possessed of a well-trained mind, an amiable disposition and a loving heart, of natural grace and dignity, an interesting and forceful speaker, he was a true leader and guide in the church both local and otherwise, a leader and guide in his own community life and a leader and guide in the social and cultural life of the German emigrants in the colonies. "He touched life at many points, and always in a way to leave it the better for the contact." No greater man was produced by the Brethren Church in that period.

Out of gratitude for the blessings of God he printed and distributed free of charge the first religious magazine in America. He issued the second and third editions of the famed Sower Bible, and continued and improved his father's newspaper and almanac. He was a hearty advocate of education and believed that an intelligent membership was as important to the church as an intelligent citizenship to the state. In this connection he took a leading part in establishing the Germantown Academy which still flourishes. Aggressive and liberal in matters of church policy, he was the greatest representative of her principles and doctrines.

In fact, so outspoken was he against war that the

dark days of the Revolution brought him serious difficulties. He staunchly stood by the church's position that war for the Christian is wrong and contrary to the teachings of Christ. Finally in 1778 his printing establishment was broken up, his property confiscated and sold in defiance of law and himself turned out without even his medicine chest. But the great-hearted man lived on without complaint and bitterness, though reduced from financial well-being to abject poverty, and continued to serve his church in many and varied capacities.

Death overtook him in the midst of his church activities on August 26, 1784, and so passed away one of the greatest figures ever associated with the history of the Brethren church.

(Writer's Note: I am especially indebted to John S. Flory: "Literary Activity of the Brethren in The Eighteenth Century," for material on this life. Also to H. A. Brandt: "Christopher Sower and Son.")